The (Future) Perfect Knight: Repetition in the *Cycle de Guillaume d'Orange*

This essay is about a particularly medieval narrative form: the 'cycle'. Cycles were vast compilations of texts produced from the thirteenth century onwards. They were often built around a core of twelfth-century narrative which was later reworked to a varying extent, and to which were added prequels and sequels. Cycles thus grew in both directions at once, with the ultimate aim the provision of the complete story about one particular character, lineage or empire. They normally ended up as single, bound codices. Their sheer length is what first strikes the modern reader; and this length responded to a specific desire for narrative to be definitive. The cycle under consideration here, the *Cycle de Guillaume d'Orange*, thus aimed to offer not just *an* account of Guillaume's life, but rather *the* account.[1] This required two kinds of completeness: one linear (whereby we have the narrative of the character's entire life, from birth to death) and one cyclical (whereby we see every episode in the character's life, through many repetitions of similar episodes).

The first poems about Guillaume appeared in the early twelfth-century; the core of the cycle is the three texts known as *Le Couronnement de Louis* (composed c. 1130), *Le Charroi de Nîmes* (1130–40) and *La Prise d'Orange* (1140s).[2] To this core were added later in the twelfth-century two sequels: *Aliscans* (1185–90)[3] and *Le Moniage*

[1] The cycle is considered here in its shorter version, which works as a biography of Guillaume, rather than its longer version, which includes prologue texts about Guillaume's ancestors in order to give a history of the entire lineage. Even in its shorter version, texts where Vivien and Rainouart rather than Guillaume are the main characters also appear, but *raison d'être* of the cycle remains the biography of Guillaume. Space does not permit consideration of the range of different manuscript versions here.

[2] *Les Rédactions en Vers du 'Couronnement de Louis'*, ed. by Yvan G. Lepage, Textes Littéraires Français, 261 (Geneva: Droz, 1978), no date of composition given; *Le Charroi de Nîmes*, ed. by Duncan MacMillan (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972) gives dates for both *Couronnement* and *Charroi*, pp. 42–43; *La Prise d'Orange* ed. by Claude Régnier, 7th edn. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1967), date given pp. 34–35. References to all texts are given as line numbers. Translations of Old French quotes are given in the footnotes.

[3] *Aliscans*, ed. by Claude Régnier, 2 vols, Textes Littéraires Français, 110 & 111 (Paris: Champion, 1990), date given I, 40. One should also note the existence of *La Chanson de Guillaume*, a poem composed between 1150 and 1175 which does not appear in any cyclical manuscript, ed. and trans. by

Guillaume (c. 1170).[4] Finally, the prequel *Les Enfances Guillaume* was added early in the thirteenth century to complete the cycle.[5] Surviving cyclical manuscripts date from the mid-thirteenth century onwards.

These latter two texts—the *Enfances*, which tells of Guillaume's youth,[6] and the *Moniage*, which tells of his days of penance preceding his death—will be our focus here. These poems ensure linear completeness at each end of the cycle by recounting the emergence and demise of the main character respectively. And here, a tension between the two types of completeness—linear and cyclical—is brought out. Linearity demands transformation, development and eventual closure, whereas cyclicity requires the repetition of similar feats. The cyclical drive is an impulse towards the maximum amount of narrative about the character; it constantly demands more of the same, resisting change.

It is in thinking this tension within completeness that the concept of 'rhythm' is useful. The cycle is given integrity not just by its linear structure (and thus by its end points) but by repetition within it. It would of course be possible to give an account of rhythm at a micro level, in the repetition of phrases, rhymes and even of the very decasyllabic lines of the poems.[7] Here, however, I would like to focus on rhythm at a macro level, witnessed in the repetition of similar narrative material. Indeed this repetition is what creates links between the texts composing the cycle. Each text here

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Philip E. Bennett (London, Grant & Cutler, 2000), date given p. 9. *Aliscans* draws upon material found in the *Chanson*.

[4] *Le Moniage Guillaume*, ed. by Nelly Andrieux-Reix, Classiques Français du Moyen Age, 145 (Paris: Champion, 2003); no date given. The date of c. 1170 is provided by Philip Bennett, *Carnaval héroïque et écriture cyclique dans la geste de Guillaume d'Orange* (Paris: Champion, 2006), p. 13.

[5] *Les Enfances Guillaume*, ed. by J.-L. Perrier (New York: Columbia UP, 1933); date given p. iii.

[6] It should be noted that the meaning of the Old French 'enfances' does not correspond to the meaning of the word in modern French. Rather, it denotes a young man's time making his name, before he attains fief and wife. A man could be an 'enfes' well into his thirties.

[7] On repetition in the *Cycle de Guillaume*, see Edward A. Heinemann, *L'Art métrique de la chanson de geste* (Geneva: Droz, 1993). The key work on structural repetition in the epic remains Jean Rychner's *La Chanson de geste: essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs* (Geneva: Droz, 1955). Roger Pensom's work on the prosody and structures of repetition with variation of the *Chanson de Roland* should also be noted: see his *Literary Technique in the 'Chanson de Roland'* (Geneva: Droz, 1982).

makes itself an authentic Guillaume-text by showing Guillaume doing a particular thing: fighting Saracens. Though he does so in different guises at different stages of the cycle—as defender of the weak king Louis in the *Couronnement*; as hero conquering fiefs abroad in the *Charroi* and the *Prise*; as defender of these territories in *Aliscans*—he is constantly performing the same action. In these texts, repetition does not jar with linear development; the different guises of Guillaume allow him to re-enact the same feats. However, in the *Enfances* and the *Moniage*, we expect—but do not get—a different Guillaume. Thus the *Enfances* in fact do not simply tell of Guillaume's youth but rather anticipate his later triumphs; in the *Moniage*, Guillaume attempts to become a monk but ends up, yet again, in combat against Saracens. These two texts are thus evidence of an irresistible rhythm at the heart of the cycle.

It is because of this omnipresence of repetition that I would like to filter my account of rhythm in the cycle through the psychoanalytic concepts of non-chronological time offered by Jacques Lacan and subsequently Julia Kristeva. First, in one of the most radical aspects of his theory, Lacan develops a concept of non-linear time in relation to the workings of the psyche and of language. He argues that in the psyche, time can act in reverse, through the processes of 'retroaction' and 'anticipation'.[8] The former concept means that the significance of past events is constantly reworked in the present, with the past being given meaning retroactively (*nachträglich* or *après-coup*). In language too, the final word of a sentence confers meaning upon all the words that precede it. Anticipation is the other end of the same process, referring to the effect of the future on the present, represented grammatically

[8] For a summary of Lacan's ideas about time, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 205–7. For a summary of debates surrounding the concept of time, medieval and modern, see Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 2003), pp. 1–34.

by the future perfect tense.[9] Confirmation of meaning will come in the future, when we will learn what the present 'will have been'. The present thus awaits the certainty, security and unity of the future. Here too, we can make a comparison with language: the first word of sentence lies in expectation of signification to come later. And finally, both concepts—retroaction and anticipation—show us how time as perceived in the psyche is based around repetition, defying linear chronology.

Kristeva's model of cyclical time is a significant departure from Lacan's. She relates non-linear time to the body, and, gendering the concept, to the female body in particular. In a famous paper, 'Le temps des femmes', Kristeva notes the association of the feminine with gestation, and suggests that women's time is not linear but cyclical, determined by the 'éternel retour d'un rythme biologique'.[10] Women are for Kristeva involved in this time rather than the (masculine) linear or historical time of teleology and project. They are therefore associated with the need for reproduction to sustain social orders. Societies too are therefore linked with reproduction, and thus have intentionality towards the past, constantly rediscovering what is lost there, and attempting to recreate it. Renewal of the social order is thus dependent on reviving the past. In the contemporary European Union project, the construction of a social unit superior to that of the nation, Kristeva notes the presence of

> une temporalité paradoxale: une sorte de 'futur antérieur', où le passé le plus refoulé, transnational, confère un visage particulier à l'uniformité programmée. Car la mémoire dont il s'agit, le dénominateur symbolique commun, concerne la réponse que des groupes humains […] ont donné, non pas aux problèmes de *production*

[9] Lacan's concept is a development of Freud's *nachträgilichkeit*, the idea that the present can affect and construct the past. See Lacan's 'Le temps logique et l'assertion de certitude anticipée' in *Écrits*, 2 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1999), I, 195–211. For a concise summary of the significance of the future perfect for Lacan, see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), pp. 64–65. For a fascinating reading of the Vulgate Cycle that makes use of the concept of logical time, see Miranda Griffin, *The Object and the Cause in the Vulgate Cycle* (London: Legenda, 2005).

[10] 'Le temps des femmes' in *Les Nouvelles Maladies de l'âme* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), pp. 297–331 (p. 298).

> de biens matériels […] mais de *re-production*, de survie de l'espèce, de vie et de mort, de corps, de sexe, de symbole.[11]

Society's ideal future in fact lies in the past; the only way forwards is backwards.

Lacan thus provides us with a way of thinking about the link between cyclical time and (narrative) language; Kristeva in turn relates this to the body and to the social order. I hope, however, to show that Kristeva's gendering of cyclical time can be rethought through examination of the *chanson de geste*, where men too are involved in cycles of repetition defined by the body. In the *Moniage*, it is Guillaume's physicality that forces him into a repeat performance that is linked with (re)producing the social order. His heroic feats are associated with the continuity of lineage, community and Christendom on the one hand and with the genesis of narrative on the other. Through the physical performance of violence, Guillaume is the embodiment of an ideal: a French Christian polity united under a king and defended by a loyal fighter.

The *Enfances*, on the other hand, concentrates on a different ideal: a fantasy of Christian superiority abroad. Yet, in both cases, the ideal is in fact to be anticipated or recaptured. Only the past or future can be ideal; the present is never ideal. Thus in the prequel and sequel to the cycle the present is evacuated; these texts work instead as an anticipation of the future and a retroactive construction of the past respectively. The space of cyclicity therefore becomes a void between a past to be rediscovered in the future and a future prefigured in the past. There is a constant *va-et-vient* between the two. Indeed the *Enfances* was written after the rest of the cycle, and is thus literally a shaping of the past in anticipation of the future. Similarly, in the *Moniage*, we see a constant reinterpretation and re-enactment of the past, whilst we also anticipate the ultimate fulfilment of Guillaume's existence in posthumous sanctity.

[11] 'Le temps des femmes', p. 303.

Les Enfances Guillaume

The *Enfances* is ostensibly about setting the scene for the narrative that will occupy the main body of the cycle. Yet it does so by ignoring certain elements of the plot to anticipate the part it sees as the 'best bit'. It is thus less an innocent introduction than an attempt to set the agenda for how the entire cycle is read. It is a retroactive creation of the past that makes the past, in turn, an enactment of the future. Thus the prologue promises that we will hear how Guillaume conquered his fief, Orange, and won his bride, Orable (the Saracen princess and enemy leader's woman, who changes her name to Guibourc after marrying the hero). Yet these amatory and military conquests in fact belong to the *Prise*. Drawn towards identifying with this text as key, the *Enfances* makes itself, paradoxically, into a repeat of what is to come; it is an anticipation of the future perfect Guillaume.

Throughout the text, Guillaume himself seems driven towards the future, to such an extent that he neglects his present. For example, when Guillaume and his brothers are invited by Charlemagne to serve him at court, he alone refuses. He chastises his siblings, asking them if their 'anfance' ('youth', 78) will last forever, and swearing to undertake the conquest of Orange the next day. He then repeatedly states his intention to convert Orange to Christianity (572–73, 1036–37). Later, he is even pleased to be captured by the Saracens, as this means that they will take him to Orange as prisoner (1124–25). And the Saracens constantly mount other attacks on his family fief of Narbonne, delaying his journey to Paris where he is to be knighted. Guillaume's later narrative pursues him here, occasionally tempting him, but always preventing him from living in his present.

He is moreover already in (albeit remote) contact with Orable, sending her a sparrowhawk (574). She in turn sends him a message to warn him of an impending Saracen attack (768–80). Crucially, she preserves her virginity for Guillaume by

deluding her husband Tiebaut with a series of spells and illusions known as the 'jeux d'Orange'. Yet the all-consuming importance of Orange and Orable here introduces inconsistencies with the plots of later texts. The first element of Guillaume's reputation in the *Couronnement* is his fierce loyalty to his king; he seeks peace at home and only later (from the *Charroi* onwards) conquest abroad. And it is not until the *Prise* that he hears of Orange and Orable for the first time from a messenger who has escaped from the city.

This incongruity is reflected in other characters' opinions about him. Thus the Saracen enemy is confused about Guillaume's status, with some characters terming him a 'diauble' ('devil', 630) and warning that he will mount a fierce attack on Orange (1659–62), whereas others insist upon his youth, citing the fact that he is not yet a knight (1443–44), and does not yet even have a beard (930–31) or a good sword (1685). The narrator highlights his prodigious prowess by referring to him as 'l'anfes Guillaumes' ('Guillaume the youth', 1003), even as he leads French troops into battle. A contrast is being set up here between Guillaume as a precocious 'enfes' and King Louis in the *Couronnement* (which directly follows the *Enfances*), who is also referred to as an 'enfes', but is portrayed as weak and cowardly. And after killing hordes of Saracens, Guillaume states that:

> Damoisiaus suix, meschins et bacheleirs;
> Onkes ancores ne fui jou adoubez,
> Espié ne lance ne hauberc n'ai porté[12]

Finally, a baron at Charlemagne's court who insults Guillaume by dismissing him as a youth soon gets his come-uppance as Guillaume hurls him against a pillar. Throughout, Guillaume is thus a youth but, more importantly, also a prefiguration of

[12] 'I am a young man, a knight-in-waiting; I have not yet been dubbed, nor have I carried a lance or spear or worn mail', 1052–54.

his future self. The man clearly makes the boy here. And when Guillaume is finally knighted, there is the sense that nothing could be more fitting:

> Molt gentement bien li sisent ses arme[13]

The text that exists to tell the tale of Guillaume's youth thus actually tells the tale of his adulthood again, differently. The *Enfances* comes up with beginning for the story of Guillaume that only makes sense after the middle of the story. If we take this text at face value, Guillaume was never really a youth. He was always associated with one particular act: the capture of Orange. This ideal moment, encapsulating Christian superiority over the Saracens, is reverberating backwards through time. This repetition of one gesture brings cyclicity into conflict with linearity, with the consistency of the plot harmed by the excessive consistency of character. The narrative thus gains a different kind of unity: one where the past is remodelled in the light of what is to come. Guillaume was always going to do what he did; things could never have been different. Repetition is played out retroactively, in an imaginary future perfect, with a great emphasis on later achievement, on what Guillaume 'will have done'. The text is tense about the present, as it seeks a perfect future.

Le Moniage Guillaume

The *Moniage* closes the cycle, and therefore aims for transformation. Guillaume's military triumphs involved the sin of violence and to compensate, Guillaume is to try to make peace with his maker by living a life of penance in a monastery. Thus Guillaume is trying to rewrite his past to reinvent himself as saint not sinner. He wishes retrospectively to confer sublimity on his entire existence. The text is again anticipating a perfect future (Guillaume as saint) here, but cannot avoid the past. Guillaume's early days in fact haunt him in a way he does not expect. In order to present the change in his behaviour, then, the text resurrects and adapts a famous line

[13] 'His arms suit him marvellously well', 2734.

from the *Couronnement*, where Guillaume told King Louis that he would dedicate the best part of his life to him:

> En ton servise vueil ma jovente user[14]

Now, similarly, he declares his intention for his latter days:

> A Deu servir userai mon ëage[15]

The parallelism of the formulations shows the later text's reworking of the past. Transformation means rethinking what has gone by. Again here, the perfect future lies in the past.

The shift from knight to monk is therefore a hard one to make, both for the character, and thereby for the text, which finds itself correspondingly obliged to switch from epic to hagiographic mode. To deal with character first, then, it is clear from the start that Guillaume has a *chanson de geste* physicality that makes him incompatible with monastic life. If for Kristeva, it is the body of the woman that associates her with cyclical time (through biological rhythms), then Guillaume's body too associates him with another kind of repeat performance. He renounces all his goods, land and even his armour and horse; he prays diligently. In short, he performs the role of monk, but he nonetheless remains essentially different. Indeed, no one has ever seen such a big monk and he looks ridiculous in robes. The gatekeeper of the monastery is scared of his 'espaules…braz…et…bu' ('shoulders, arms and chest', 109).[16] Moreover, his body predisposes him to excess: he eats as much as four monks. His immense appetite ultimately threatens to endanger the fragile economy of the monastery. Guillaume simply does not fit in, remaining more hunk than monk.

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[14] 'I want to spend my youth in your service', *Couronnement*, rédaction AB, 2228.

[15] 'I will spend my old age in the service of God', *Les Deux Rédactions en vers du 'Moniage Guillaume'*, ed. by Wilhelm Cloetta, 2 vols (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1906–11), seconde rédaction, I, 5469. This parallelism in the formulations is picked up on by Sara Sturm-Maddox in her article 'From *Couronnement* to *Moniage*: the "*jovente*" and the "*ëage*" of Guillaume' in *VIII Congresso de la Société Rencesvals, Pamplona–Santiago de Compostela 15 a 25 de agosto de 1978* (Pamplona: Institución Príncipe de Viana, 1981), pp. 491–95.

[16] *Moniage*, ed. by Andrieux-Reix. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Guillaume therefore needs another way to reinterpret his past in preparation for his holy future. Indeed, as an angel tells him:

> Sire Guillelmes, sez que Dex t'a mandé?
> Tu l'as servi de bone volanté
> Et sor paiens ton cors molt a grevé;
> Par moi te mande li rois de majesté
> Qu'en paradis a fet ton lit paré
> Quant la venra que tu devras finer;
> Mes encor, voir, te velt Dex esprover,
> Encor t'estuet granz paines endurer.
> En cest desert feras tu ton hostel,
> Serviras Deu et soir et avesprer;
> Et il te mande qu'il te dorra assez;
> Ton bien sera el ciel guerredoné[17]

The temporality of the passage is interesting: heaven awaits in the future, but God has *already* prepared Guillaume's place; the word 'encor' appears twice, highlighting the repetition of the past in the future; finally the text ends with an insistent sequence of four verbs in the future tense ('feras', 'serviras', dorra', 'sera'). Guillaume's previous bodily performance is explicitly cited as worthy ('*ton cors* molt a grevé'), but the salvation promised requires transformation as well as repetition. Yet, in his next incarnation as a hermit in the desert, Guillaume's immense frame just seems to attract trouble, always leading him back to violence. First, he is attacked by robbers, and then later a giant, before his old enemy finds him. Guillaume has spent his life fighting Saracens in repeated battles throughout the cycle, and they are not about to let him rest now. They want revenge against him for his previous feats against them, and see his retirement as a chance to defeat him and finally conquer France. Conversely, his body too seems timeless: it does not age and is always able to accomplish more feats of violence, thus perpetuating the narrative dynamic. The *Moniage*, which has the job

[17] 'Lord Guillaume, do you know what message God sends you? You have served him willingly, and pained your body by fighting pagans; through me the great Lord tells you that he has prepared your place in heaven where you shall go when you die, but first, it is true, God wishes to test you more, you still have great trials to suffer. In this desert you will make your lodging, you will serve God in the evening and at night and he tells you that he will grant you that your goodness will be rewarded in heaven', 2580–91.

of closing the cycle, is trying to install a different type of heroism, through a process of transformation. But it is instead getting caught in the cycle's mechanisms of repetition, forcing Guillaume back into performance of his old self. The text is striving towards the perfect future of closure, but is riddled with replays of the past.

Guillaume finds himself surrounded by unwanted enemies. And even after he wins this battle against the Saracens, we are told that his time for peace has not yet come:

> Or recommencent ses paines a venir[18]

Again the present is a rerun of the past ('or *re*commencent'), stretching out to an implied future ('a venir') of more of the same. To guarantee transformation, then, to move from knighthood to sainthood, the text first has to repeat knighthood, differently. This is done by making Guillaume a reluctant hero, an unwilling fighter, thereby returning to the dynamic at work in the *Couronnement*, where Guillaume first takes on the thankless and endless task of defending Louis. He becomes Louis' reluctant saviour again here, as another horde of Saracens surrounds Paris. Louis sends for Guillaume, who pretends to be someone else, reporting Guillaume's death. This provides him with anonymity necessary when he decides to save the day once again. The body and identity are thus finally separated: Guillaume fights, but not as 'Guillaume'.

After this feat, the text is free of its debt to the *chanson de geste* genre and is finally able to pursue transformation. Guillaume is therefore finally given a new enemy: the devil. He sees a perilous ford and decides to build a bridge so that the pilgrims of the future will be able to cross more easily. But the devil comes each night to knock down whatever Guillaume has built during the day. After a month, there is a final confrontation in which Guillaume throws the devil into the water. He finishes the

[18] 'Now his troubles are starting again', 4923.

bridge, passes away and takes up his place in paradise. The future perfect point has been reached, and the cycle now closes.

Transformation thus finally comes out of repetition. The initial failure to achieve change in identity produces the comic effect of Guillaume as ridiculous monk, but as a hermit Guillaume straddles two identities, remaining epic hero but anticipating his saintly end. As Sara Sturm-Maddox puts it: 'the particular interest of the *Moniage* lies in its successful assimilation of the heroic pattern of epic to that of hagiographic narrative, while preserving the distinctive features of the legendary biography for which it serves as conclusion'.[19] He repeats previous feats with a difference, as in his final battle against the Saracens he is *incognito*. This loss of identity in turn prefigures the self-effacement of his thankless task of bridge-building. Similarly, his confrontations with Saracens foreshadow his encounter with the devil. The future can here only work as a reinvention of the past.

Conclusion

Neither the *Enfances* nor the *Moniage* is able to resist the rhythm that dominates and shapes the cycle. Thus the *Enfances* is warped by the purpose of anticipating the future; the *Moniage* struggles to achieve transformation because it is haunted by a past rooted in the body. The former fits closely the Lacanian concept of time, whereas the latter forces us to rethink productively Kristeva's idea of corporeal temporality. In both texts, the present moment is caught in a dialectic between past and future and is thereby evacuated. The point here is not to admonish these medieval texts for failing to achieve a smooth linear narrative. Rather, through use of the concept of rhythm, we have seen that the clash between linearity and repetition is symptomatic of the cycle's structure and model of time. Linearity does not have priority; preference is given to cyclical time, with repetition and rhythm as structuring factors. Rhythm here shapes

[19] 'From *Couronnement*', p. 494.

the reading experience as much as development and closure, and is thus vital to appreciating the unique narrative and aesthetic system that constitutes medieval cycles. These intricate and apparently contradictory texts actually find their (cyclical) consistency in their (linear) inconsistency.

Suggested further reading

Bennett, Philip, *Carnaval héroïque et écriture cyclique dans la geste de Guillaume d'Orange* (Paris: Champion, 2006).

Besamusca, Bart, and others, eds, *Cyclification: The Development of Narrative Cycles in the Chansons de Geste and the Arthurian Romances* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1994).

Sturm-Maddox, Sara and Donald Maddox, eds, *Transtextualities: Of Cycles and Cyclicity in Medieval French Literature* (Binghamton, NY: SUNY, 1996).